

## I. RESEARCH ARTICLES

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THE LINGUACULTURAL VIEW OF POLISH *SŁOMA*  
‘STRAW’: AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC ACCOUNT\*

**Abstract.** The conceptualisations of straw in Polish urban culture (and the literary variety of Polish) and in the folk variety of the language are different. In the former, straw has a low position and symbolises that which is mediocre, impermanent, or of little value. In contrast, in Polish folk culture, based on traditional farming and cultivation of cereals, straw enjoys a much higher status: it is valued as a material in insulation and production of useful artefacts, such as mats, baskets, grain containers, shoes, beehives, toys, or decorations. Its linguacultural image is rich in positive associations. In customs and auguries straw is treated as a magical medium operating between what is alive and what is dead. It is linked with fertility and has erotic symbolism. The reconstruction of the folk stereotype of straw proposed here is based on the tenets of the cognitive definition.

**KEY WORDS:** Polish national and folk linguaculture; linguacultural view of straw; cognitive definition; magical medium; symbolism of straw

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## I. General issues: Linguaculture and national culture. Methodology of a reconstruction of the stereotype of straw

Straw is conceptualised differently in Polish urban culture (and the literary variety of Polish) than in Polish folk culture and language. In standard Polish and the conceptual system it embodies, straw has a low position and symbolises that which is mediocre, impermanent, or of little value, e.g. *słomiany zapał* (lit. 'straw enthusiasm') 'a flash in the pan', *słomiany wdowiec* (lit. 'straw widower') 'a male whose wife has gone away for some time'; *ktoś idzie (stoi) jak na słomianych nogach* 'someone is walking (standing) as if on straw legs' (unsteadily). The saying *słoma z butów wyłazi* 'straw sticks out of someone's shoes' is used by educated urban speakers in disrespectful or contemptuous reference to the uncouth nouveau riche. *Słomiany dach* 'straw roof' or *strzecha ze słomy* 'thatched roof' were until recently synonymous with poverty and backwardness. These negative connotations were inherited (and enriched with new ones) by the figure of *Straw-wrap* (Pol. *Chochół*, from the name for a covering for the rosebush cane) in Stanisław Wyspiański's drama *The Wedding* (1900): the character was a straw effigy that causes lethargy in his guests, and stops them from taking action (even though they have been waiting for the arrival of the legendary bard Wernyhora who was supposed to call them to revolt). The straw-wrap dance in the play's final scene is a symbol of the Poles' stagnation and impotence.

This kind of low evaluation of straw is to an extent also present in folk Polish linguaculture, which due to its proverbial pungency can even be said to augment some of the material's negative connotations: *What good are you to me, straw man, if I can kick you out of my bed* (Krzyż Kuj 1/264);<sup>1</sup> *słomiana wdowa* 'straw widow' is a woman who sleeps around (TN Łazory 1990); *słomiana panna* 'straw maid' is an unmarried woman who has had a child (Kul Wiel 3/116); *słomiany kawaler* 'straw bachelor' has had a child with another woman (TN Łazory 1990); *słomiany ojciec* 'straw father': *Even though he be a straw father, if you do have a father, respect him* (MAAE 1898/161);<sup>2</sup> *słomiany ogień* 'straw fire' lights up in an instant and quickly dies away (TN Kąkolewnica 1990).<sup>3</sup> Kashubia abounds in expressions of this kind: *mieć słomiané sërce* 'to have a straw heart' (about an unreliable

<sup>1</sup> *Cóż mi p<sup>u</sup>o tobie, słomiany chłopie, kiedy cie nogóm z łóżka wyk<sup>u</sup>opie.*

<sup>2</sup> *Choć słomiany <sup>u</sup>ocięć, kie je <sup>u</sup>ocięć, to g<sup>u</sup>o sanuj.*

<sup>3</sup> A negative connotation of straw is also found in the Bible, where straw and chaff symbolise someone or something of little merit or value. The Old Testament says this about the wicked: *How often are they like straw before the wind, and like chaff swept away by a whirlwind?* (Job 21:18; cf. also Psalms 1:4, 35:5; Isaiah 17:13, 29:5, 41:15–16). In the

person); *słomiani* 'made of straw' (uncertain) (Sych SGKasz 5/83); *mieć słomiane ręce* 'have straw hands' (be weak) (Sych SGKasz 4/302); *nie być wart ani wiechca słomę* 'not to be worth a wisp of straw' (be worth nothing) (Sych SGKasz 5/82); *wziąć słomę* 'take straw' (do lousy business) (Sych SGKasz 5/82).

In folk proverbs, straw is considered inferior to the cereal's most valuable part, namely the grain: *Grain for grain and straw for free* (PSL 1989/3/181);<sup>4</sup> in a soldier's song it stands lower than oats: *As long as I was ridden by my master, I used to eat pure oats. Now there is not even straw, crows will peck us away* [spoken by a horse] (Bart PANLub 3/406);<sup>5</sup> it is obviously rated lower than gold: *Work and will turn straw into gold* (NKPP praca 51).<sup>6</sup> In a jocular wedding song with many variants, a small statue of pea haulm and straw is ridiculed: *Harness, Johnny, these black horses, we'll go to get your wife's dowry. And what kind of dowry does my wife have? Two sheaves of pea haulm and the third one of straw* (K 3 Kuj 309).<sup>7</sup>

However, in Polish folk culture, based on traditional farming and cereal cultivation, straw generally enjoys a much higher status than in literary Polish; it is valued as a handy material in everyday life and for making many useful utensils (see point 9 below). The image of straw in folk Polish also has rich cultural content, with origins in magic thinking that links straw and cereals, rye and life, happiness and love, into one associative chain. An informant reports: *Well, cereals rest on straw, right; chains were made of rye straw usually; and surely it means life because it means bread, which brings happiness, love and respect* (Smyk 2009: 166). We will endeavour to illustrate these rich connotations of straw in the present study.

The reconstruction of the folk linguistic view of straw that is proposed here has been carried out along the lines established for the compilation of the Dictionary of Folk Stereotypes and Symbols (SSiSL 1996–2012).<sup>8</sup> The

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New Testament, chaff stands for the rejected and condemned: *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clean out his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the storehouse, but the chaff he will burn up with inextinguishable fire.* (Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17).

<sup>4</sup> *Ziarno za ziarno, a słoma za darmo.*

<sup>5</sup> *Póki na mnie mój pan siadał, to ja goły owies jadał. Teraz ni ma prosty słomy, nas ruzniesz krule wrony.*

<sup>6</sup> *Praca z ochotą przerabia słomę w złoto.*

<sup>7</sup> *Zaprzęgaj, Jasieńku, te wronie konie, pojedziem po posag tej twojej żonie. A cóż tam za posag tyj moji żony? Dwa snopy grochowiń i trzeci słomy.*

<sup>8</sup> This study is a shortened version of the much more extensive entry for *słoma* 'straw', to appear in vol. 2 of SSiSL, devoted to plants. Part 1 will deal with cereals). The explication in the dictionary will be accompanied by robust exemplification, samples of the language of folklore and written peasant poetry, as well as ethnographic accounts and word-of-mouth reports. Here, selected illustrative examples (sometimes without precise references) are incorporated into the main body of the article.

first step consists in collecting strictly linguistic data, such as the basic lexical meanings of the names for a given item, their metaphorical extensions (i.e. semantic derivatives), synonyms and antonyms, word-formation derivatives, and stable collocations. Then, texts and co-linguistic data (records of beliefs, customs, and practices) are analysed. As far as texts are concerned, preference is given to stereotyped genres: riddles, proverbs, magic spells, songs, and tales; non-stereotyped texts are investigated mainly for presupposed or at least recurring features. The results of the analysis, however, will not be arranged according to the category of data (as is done e.g. for the stereotype of the mother in Bartmiński 1998), but holistically, with a view to extracting from the data the facets important in the description of a given image (as advocated by Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2014).

If lexical and collocational data allow for a “context-free” description of straw and for only partial understanding of its significance in folk language and culture, it is only when fuller contexts for the use of the lexeme (*słoma*) are considered, along with predicate-argument structures, that one can enrich the description with scenarios in which straw is a participant. Only when such recurring, relatively stable contexts of straw properties and its practical and cultural uses are taken into account, and when typical motifs are identified (cf. Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2007: 49–75), can one hope for a multidimensional reconstruction of the linguacultural image (or stereotype) of straw.

The stereotype of straw includes the following facets:

1. Its name (*słoma*) with its basic meaning.
2. Kinds of straw.
3. Complexes and collections.
4. The name’s position in the lexico-semantic field: synonyms, antonyms, endonyms.
5. Appearance and properties of straw.
6. Measures.
7. Straw as location of events.
8. Transformations.
9. Practical use: straw as material.
10. Straw as fodder and human food in times of famine.
11. Use of straw in rituals and magic. Social customs.
12. Use of straw in rituals and magic. Family customs.
13. Use of straw in medicinal magic: a special role of straw from thatched roofs.
14. Use in protective magic.
15. Use in practices to ensure prosperity and wealth.
16. Use in augury and fortune-telling concerning marriage, quality of the crop, life expectancy, and the arrival of guests.

17. Equivalences.
18. Symbolism.

## II. Explication

**1. The name of straw and its basic meaning.** The word *słoma* in the sense 'dry cereal stalks', recorded in Polish since the 15<sup>th</sup> c., is a Slavic form (cf. Czech *sláma*, Russian *solóma*, Serbo-Croatian *slama* etc.) and is related to the German *Halm* 'stalk', Lat. *culmus* 'stalk, blade of grass', Greek *kalamos*, Old Indic *calakas* 'stalk'. Its etymology is not very revealing: it does not point to the properties of straw other than those present in its basic meaning. In proverbs, the meaning of *słoma* is generalised into 'something of low value, idle, futile, or poor': *Threshing straw is pointless* (NKPP *słoma* 6);<sup>9</sup> *A straw Johnny fares better than a gold Kathy*<sup>10</sup> (meaning: 'A poor bachelor finds it easier to get married than a rich maid does'); *A farmhand, even if a straw one [poor], will get married* (NKPP *słomiany* 1).<sup>11</sup>

**2. Kinds of straw:** *rye straw* (long, straight, appreciated for its use in making binders for oat and barley sheaves, pallets, roofs, mats, and home-made tapestries); *wheat straw* (of little value), *barley straw* (soft, used for padding cradles; *for cattle, it is better than shoddy hay*), *oat straw* (soft and sweet, *good for livestock*, also for sleeping on and making pallets).

**3. Complexes and collections.** When evaluated positively, straw co-occurs with grain: *Where there is straw, there is grain* (NKPP *słoma* 3);<sup>12</sup> when evaluated negatively, it co-occurs with chaff: *in his/her head only straw and chaff* (NKPP *głowa* 145a).<sup>13</sup> In a satirical wedding song, a sheaf of straw and a sheaf of pea stalks is a miserable dowry (K 3 Kuj 309); in another song, Kathy weaves herself a chaplet of straw and cornflowers, which then boys take away from her (Bart PANLub 2/342).

**4. The name's position in the lexico-semantic field: synonyms, antonyms, endonyms.** The Polish *słoma* does not really have synonyms: the closest candidate *źdźbło* 'blade' is in fact synonymous to *słomka* 'a straw stalk'. The antonyms to *słoma* (*ziarno* 'grain, seeds', *siano* 'hay', *pierzyna* 'eiderdown', *złoto* 'gold') are contextual: *Straw and grain are equal at birth but straw is for donkeys and grain is for kings* (NKPP *słoma* 7);<sup>14</sup> *Straw for*

<sup>9</sup> *Próżno słomę młócić.*

<sup>10</sup> *Lepiej słomianemu Jasiowi niż złotej Kasi.*

<sup>11</sup> *Parobek, choć słomiany to się ożeni.*

<sup>12</sup> *Gdzie słoma tam i ziarno znajdziesz.*

<sup>13</sup> *Słoma z sieczką we łbie i plewy.*

<sup>14</sup> *Słoma a ziarno są sobie równe w urodzeniu, a przecie słoma dla ośłów, ziarno dla królów.*

*the cattle, hay for the horses, so say the priests* (NKPP słoma 7);<sup>15</sup> in an orphan's song: *My beloved mum, how sweet was my sleep when you covered me with an eiderdown; now I have to sleep on straw* (K 19 Kiel 143);<sup>16</sup> in a proverb: *At home there is straw, at other people's places – gold* (NKPP dom 23);<sup>17</sup> *A straw farmhand will find a match sooner than a golden girl will* (Rak Podh 30).<sup>18</sup>

Endonyms<sup>19</sup> of *słoma*, i.e. its semantic derivatives, are numerous and relate to various kinds of metonymy: *żdźbło* 'blade', *kłos* 'ear', *ziarno* 'grain', *plewy* 'chaff'; *powrósto* 'binder', *chochoł* 'straw covering; straw effigy', *snop* 'sheaf', *dziesiętek* 'a stack of ten sheaves', *mendel* 'a stack of fifteen sheaves', *kopa* 'stack'; *sieczka* 'chaff',<sup>20</sup> *strzecha* 'thatched roof', *mata* 'mat', *słomianka* 'straw mat', etc.

**5. Appearance and properties.** The adjectives *słomiany*, *słomiasty* (Dej Kiel 28/184), *słomiaty* (Paj Koc 97), *słomny* (Karł SJP 6/213). Others, besides their purely relational sense – 'made of straw' – also have qualitative meanings: *słomkowy* 'light yellow', *słomiany* 'resembling straw in colour', and evaluative meanings of 'mediocre' (e.g. *słomiany ojciec* 'straw father') or 'uncertain' (Sych SGKasz 5/83).

The combustibility of straw is coded in the expressions: something *pali się* (*gore*) *jak słoma* 'burns like straw' (in a flash), *do ognia słomy przykładac* 'add straw to fire' (do something unnecessary and dangerous); its limpness and softness surfaces in *ktoś idzie/stoi jak na słomianych nogach* 'someone walks/stands like on straw legs'.

**6. Measures.** A single stalk of straw is called *słominka* or *słomka*; there can also be: *pęk słomy* 'a bunch of straw', *wiecheć słomy* 'a wisp of straw', *garść słomy* 'a handful of straw', *snopek* 'sheaf' and *wiązka słomy* 'a bundle of straw'; stacked straw is called *stóg* 'stack', *sterta* 'heap', or *bróg* 'rick': *If there's no more room for straw or hay in the barn, one makes a rick behind the barn, it's made of planks or poles and that's where the straw is stacked* (Pelc SGLub 2/373–374).<sup>21</sup> Today, straw is usually coiled (*zwija się w zwoje*) or formed into bales (*bele*).

<sup>15</sup> *Słoma dla bydła, siano dla koni, tak powiadają księża plebani.*

<sup>16</sup> *Moja miłą matuchno, jak się spało miluchno, gdyś mię kryła w pierzynie, teraz musę na słomie*

<sup>17</sup> *Doma – słoma, a u kogo złoto.*

<sup>18</sup> *Piyrwy słomiany parobek się "ozyni jak złotą dziewczka wyda.*

<sup>19</sup> The term proposed by David Allan Cruse, used by Wierzbicka (1993: 260).

<sup>20</sup> The English word *chaff* is the closest equivalent of both the Polish *plewy* 'the husks of grains and grasses that are separated during threshing' and *sieczka* 'straw cut up for fodder' (dictionary.com). [transl. note]

<sup>21</sup> *Jak się słoma czy siano ni mieści w studole, to się zbijo taki bróg za stodoło, ton je z desek albo z pali i tam się skłodo słome.*

## 7. Straw as location of events.

(a) A proverb says: *It is on straw that one is born, and on straw that one dies* (NKPP człowiek 145).<sup>22</sup> In carols, a frequent motif is that of Jesus being born on straw: *There between the two animals is straw for a bed; there Virgin Mary gave birth to Lord Jesus* (Bart PANLub 1/160);<sup>23</sup> *Baby Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem; there he lies innocent on hard straw* (Rog Śląsk 211);<sup>24</sup> *Lying on straw, baby Jesus is crying, precious pearls fall from his eyes* (Miod Pas 113).<sup>25</sup> Baby Jesus is covered with straw for bedclothes (Bart PANLub 1/158–159). Straw was used as the bedding for a woman in labour to aid delivery (Dwor WMaz 22–23, Udz Biec 132), as well as for a dying person to ease the agony. A coffin with the deceased was also placed on straw (Sych SGKasz 4/112, TN Harasiuki 1990).

(b) Straw (as well as hay) is a preferred location for a love rendezvous; a girl tempts a boy to come over to the straw in the barn: *In the barn, on short-stalked straw, she would beckon and call Johnny: come over, Johnny, to me* (Biel Kasz 2/170);<sup>26</sup> a girl is unhappy being separated from her lover: *My beloved God, Johnny's not home, the straw on my bed has been orphaned* (Sad Podh 134).<sup>27</sup> In courting and love songs, it is girls who are more active in encouraging boys to engage in romance (a girl makes having sex with her easier by putting straw in her doorway), K 12 Poz 184, Hens Wiedz 129, Rak Podh 93, Kaś SGO 1/170); girls also reproach boys for their impotence (cf. *słomiana szabla* 'straw sabre', i.e. penis, K 4 Kuj 11). Love-making on straw is praised in one of many variants of a metaphorical song about a hawk and a hen: *He put her on straw and spread her wings; he blew her feathers apart and plunged his claws* (K 22 Łęcz 125, variants in Bart PANLub 4/309).<sup>28</sup>

(c) Sleeping on hard (bare) straw is lamented by an orphan (K 19 Kiel 142–143) or by a lonely girl: *And I have to sleep on bare straw, turn from side to side, with no-one next to me* (Bart PANLub 4/206);<sup>29</sup> however, in proverbs this is portrayed as a normal situation: *Two people in harmony will sleep on the same straw* (NKPP zgoda 6b);<sup>30</sup> *Straw will afford you the*

<sup>22</sup> *Na słomie człowiek się rodzi, na słomie umiera.*

<sup>23</sup> *Tam między dwoma bydłatkoma, tam leży słoma barłozeczkom, tam porodziła Pana Jezusa Panna Maryja.*

<sup>24</sup> *Narodziło się dzieciątko w mieście Betlehem, a tam leży niewiniątko na twardej słomie.*

<sup>25</sup> *Leżąc na słomie, łzy toczy, drogie perły leją oczy.*

<sup>26</sup> *W stodole na dole, na krótki słomie, kiwała, wołała: pódź, Jasiu, dō mie.*

<sup>27</sup> *Mityz, mocny B"oze, ni ma Jasia doma, "osierociła mi na p"ościeli słoma.*

<sup>28</sup> *Położył ją na słomie i te skrzydła na stronie; i rozdmuchał jeji piórka, i zapuścił swe pazurki.*

<sup>29</sup> *A jo nieboziuchna na goły słumie, przewróce sie z bocku na bok, nikoguj przy mnie.*

<sup>30</sup> *Dwóch się zgodnych na jednej słomie prześpi.*

*same good sleep as bedclothes* (NKPP spać 60);<sup>31</sup> *Home is home, even if there's bare straw on the bed* (Sych SGKasz 5/82).<sup>32</sup>

**8. Transformations.** In tales, a witch (Kul Wiel 3/474–475) or a boggy (Kul MiW 429, Wisła 1900/401, ŁSE 1962/125, K 7 Krak 69, 75, Sim Wierz 262) turns into a stalk of straw. In Silesian records, the souls of those responsible for misdeeds, doing penance by roaming fields and forests in the form of lights, turn into a sheaf of straw (Sim Wierz 253); in Kashubia, the cereal demon *latalëca* turns into a burning heap of straw (Kuk Kasz 292).<sup>33</sup> In a tale from the Łomża region, a monster ghost of a cruel heir to land turns into a dog, cat, and straw, eventually to become human – he is then saved and goes to heaven (LL 1962/4–6/79).

**9. Practical use: straw as material.** Straw was used for thatching roofs, insulating doors of houses and farm buildings, protecting potatoes, trees, and grapevine from frost. It was also put into shoes for insulation, used as fuel or source of light in the form of straw bundles. It was used as bedding (cf. point 7 above), for making pallets, cushions, and horse-collars; it was spread on the floors of barns, stables, and pigsties for the comfort of the livestock.

Being elastic and durable, straw (especially rye straw) was and still is used in braiding, for making ritualistic artefacts, garments, decorations, mats, doormats, home-made tapestries, grain containers, and baskets, including special small baskets for holding bread loaves before baking (Dej Kiel 28/184). In Kashubia, it was used to make covered baskets (*plecënice*) for catching wild bees (Kuk Kasz 128), shoes called *słomiaki*, beehives called *koszki* (Paj Koc 58), and toys called *wiatraczki* ‘little vanes’ (Chęć Życie 88).

Straw was used for decorative purposes, e.g. for making the so-called *pajaki* ‘little spiders’ which augmented fertility and ensured the continuity of vegetation, as well as having apotropaic qualities (Sew Podł 41–43).

A special kind of straw artefact were hats called *słómioki* (SCiesz 265) or *kăpery* in Kashubia (Sych SGKasz 2/133): in legends they signalled various characters belonged to another world, e.g. a drowned person was portrayed as a man wearing a straw hat (Wisła 1898/57), a field demon called *jaroszek*

<sup>31</sup> *Tak się dobrze można wyspać na słomie jak na pościeli.*

<sup>32</sup> *Doma le je doma, choćbë w łózkù bëła le gołã słoma.*

<sup>33</sup> Belief in cereal demons comes from Germany: a cereal demon allegedly moves around by being carried in a badly threshed stack (Wört Hoff 5/312). For protection against witches and demons stalks of straw arranged into a cross were used (Wört Hoff 5/530). In Oldenburg, to prevent milk from being spoiled by witches, straw stalks in the shape of a cross were placed under the milk container, and a cross was marked there with chalk (Wört Hoff 5/334–335).



would appear as a small boy with a straw hat (Sim Wierz 252), the devil was impersonated by a human in a brown jacket and a straw hat (Peł Dem 110).

In satirical songs, various straw objects are mentioned as examples of poor quality artefacts: an impotent male is ridiculed as having a straw sabre (penis) (K 4 Kuj 11); a boy courting a girl has straw horses and a sack made of spider web (Pol Rud 129); a farmer has straw oxen (K 71 San 57); *Kusy Jan*<sup>34</sup> shoots poppy seeds from his straw gun (K 17 Lub 58); a girl puts an easy-to-penetrate straw barrier to allegedly protect herself from her boyfriend (Rak Podh 93); an unchaste girl has a straw chaplet (a symbol of virginity) (Bart PANLub 2/342); a stupid man puts up straw fences, thinking he will shortly die (Nieb Przes 92); a frequent motif is that of an ironic straw belt used by a ridiculed figure called *Lajbuś* (Her Kal 112); in a proverb, *He who wastes time, will be given a straw belt* (Plesz Międz 160).<sup>35</sup>

#### 10. Straw as fodder and human food in times of famine.

A proverb says: *Straw for the cattle, hay for the horses* (NKPP słoma 7).<sup>36</sup> Straw was chopped into chaff as mediocre fodder for the cattle, but in times of famine it was also consumed by people: *People would eat straw and bake pies from sawdust; they would pick weeds and stuff: nettles, grasses, burdock; they would chop that up and cook food from it. But they would only get sick from it and die like flies* (Kąś Podh 3/12).<sup>37</sup>

**11. Use in rituals and magic. Social customs.** Straw, although light and dry, contains traces of the life past; it functions in between what is alive and what is dead: its borderline status makes it fit for acting as a medium in the passage from one state to the other. Magical functions are ascribed to it in traditional social annual and family customs, as well as in augury and fortune-telling.<sup>38</sup>

The most important practices are enumerated below.

(1) Straw was brought inside the house on Christmas Eve, for *there would be no real Christmas without straw* (TN Prałkowce 1994). It was spread on the floor and tucked behind pictures on the walls, which was accompanied by people saying: *Straw to the house, poverty out of the house* (MAAE

<sup>34</sup> A figure in the so-called "reverse world" of jocular folk songs.

<sup>35</sup> *Kto marnuje czas, temu słomiany pas.*

<sup>36</sup> *Słoma dla bydła, siano dla koni.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ludziska zarli słome, z trocin piekli moskole [placki], a pote zbierali se leniejakie zielska: pokrzywy, trowy, łopuchy, siekali to i warzyli z tego warmuz. Ale to ino pochorowali sie z tego zarcio, przekopyrowali sie jak muchy.*

<sup>38</sup> This is common in the whole Slavic folk culture, in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, as well as in the south Slavic territory; cf. the article on *soloma* in Slav Tol 5/107–113 (author of article: Olga Byelova).

1914/216).<sup>39</sup> A room with straw on the floor was to resemble the Bethlehem stable (PSL 1990/3/58), and the manger where baby Jesus lay (PSL 1983/1–2/95). After the Christmas Eve supper, people would lie down on the straw to secure health and stamina for the following year (Wes Śląsk 209).

The Christmas Eve straw played a special role: it was taken out to the field where cabbage was to be sown so the cabbage would grow big (MAAE 1903/255). It was also fed to the cattle and horses, sometimes together with the Christmas Eve wafer (Kot San 43, K 11 Poz 142), to protect them against illnesses.

Similar qualities were ascribed to the straw used in the custom of Marzanna drowning on the first day of spring (Wisła 1904/532; Upper Silesia). In Silesia, to ensure a good growth for chickens, the female farmer would put into their nests the straw plucked from the ritualistic straw bear (Pośp Śląsk 298).

In the Koszalin region (northern Poland), on Christmas Eve people would tie straw around one another for happiness (Kul Kosz 215). At the beginning of harvest, straw was also tied around roadside crosses, for God to bless the farming (K 9 Poz 162).

(2) Christmas sheaf. On Christmas Eve in eastern Poland (the Lublin region, southern Mazovia), a sheaf of straw called “the king” was placed in the corner of the house: *On Christmas Eve, people would make a bundle of straw and call it “the king”; they would put it in the corner or next to the holy picture or on a beam, and it would stay there until the Epiphany, and then it was taken to the barn* (Pelc SGLub 1/153).<sup>40</sup> The sheaf was also called “the Three Magi” or “carol” (in Podlachia), “the old man” (around Zamość and Hrubieszów in south-eastern Poland), occasionally “the caroller” or “the old woman” (Peters 1986/22–23; Czyżewski 2003, map 2, p. 130).

(3) Fruit trees were girded with straw on Christmas Eve, sometimes on New Year’s Eve or the Epiphany.<sup>41</sup> In this way, trees were given a chance to celebrate, so that they would bear good fruit (*žebě dobrze rodzěťe*) (Sych SGKasz 6/256), or so that they would not get damaged by hares or worms, or would not break in the frost (Kąś Podh 3/52). In the Kalisz region, the custom was viewed as wishful carolling for the trees. In the Rzeszów region

<sup>39</sup> *Słoma do chałupy, a bieda z chałupy.*

<sup>40</sup> *W dzień Wigilii to robili take wiązankę ze słomy, to się nazywało król i to w kącie stało, albo gdzie tam koło obrazu czy na belku i to już do Trzech Królów w chałupie siedziało, a w Trzy Króle się wynosiło do stodoły.*

<sup>41</sup> In German folk culture, the custom (for which the straw from the Christmas Eve supper was used) was performed on New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, Shrovetide, Easter, Pentecost, St. John’s Day (June 24), or All Souls’ Day (Nov 1) (Wört Hoff 6/1168).

(south-eastern Poland), the custom was explained as "harnessing the devil", so that he would not harm people (Kot Urok 123).

While girding the trees, the farmer would lightly hit the trunk with the axe poll (Kot Urok 120). In the Sieradz region, he would say slowly: *Bear fruit, you apple tree, and go to say the morning prayer with us.*<sup>42</sup> In Warmia and Masuria it was said: *I'm giving you a new year, you give me fruit in return* (Szyf MiW 34).<sup>43</sup> In the village of Delejów (today's Ukraine), the formula was: *Lord Jesus was born so that this tree would also bear ample fruit* (MAAE 1914/50).<sup>44</sup> Sometimes the farmer would engage in a ritual dialogue with the tree and threaten it: *I will cut you down!*, to which his wife would respond: *Do not do it, for it will bear fruit* (Gier Szczod 15, cf. also Kul MiW 414, Kul Kosz 216, Drab Podl 107, Cisz Sławsk 35–36, K 73 Krak 1/22, Pośp Śląsk 58, Kot Urok 120, Udz Biec 185). In the Malbork region, the act of girding was performed barefoot in total silence (Łęga Malb 126).

(4) Scattering straw over the field. In Mazovia and the Lublin region, after cereal seeds had been sown, long straight straw was thrown on the field so that the rye would grow tall (Dwor Maz 191); straw was also thrown on the patch crosswise so that the cereal would become like that straw (Plesz Międz 93).

(5) Festive props and decorations. Straw and coloured tissue paper were used to make the so-called "spiders" for decorating houses on Christmas Eve, before Easter, or on St. John's Eve. Straw and wafer were used to make a spherical "world" that was hung under the ceiling (Kot Urok 117). Straw was also used to make a star that was placed above the front door (Udz Krak 34–35) and chains for decorating the Christmas tree (Karw Dobrz 180) or the *gaik*, a small green twig or tree that was carried around the village in a spring-welcoming ritual (Pośp Śląsk 164).

(6) Figures and effigies girded with or made of straw: the bear, the old man (*dziad*), the ruffian (*drab*), the garbage man, the Shrovetide figure (*mięsopust*). There was a custom practiced usually during Shrovetide that involved the figure of the bear. It was called *wodzenie niedźwiedzia* 'leading the bear', *niedźwiedzie* 'bears', *misie* 'bears' [affectionate], *bery* 'bears', *dziady* 'old men', *murzyny* 'blacks' [lit. 'Negroes'], (Cholewa 2016/194–195). This was usually practiced during Shrovetide, on Ash Wednesday, or Easter Monday: "The outfit is made directly on the man playing the bear; he is wrapped in straw binders or plaits that are then tied with a string. The straw must be scythed manually – if it's done with a machine, it will not

<sup>42</sup> *Ródź, jabłonko, ródź i z nami na jutrznię pójdz.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ja ci daję nowelatkę, a ty mi daj owoc za to.*

<sup>44</sup> *Chrystus Pan narodził się, aby i to drzewo rodziło rżęsięsto.*

work” (Cholewa 2016: 197). Dances with the bear were believed to bring prosperity to the farmstead (Pośp Śląsk 131–132).

Another ritual was beating with a straw whip. In Mazovia, a boy dressed as a bear would hit all the girls who had not married that year with a long straw whip (called *pyta*) (K 24 Maz 121). In Kujawy, on Holy Thursday boys would make straw whips and wave them in the house of the widow they went to visit, as a sign of her imminent wedding (Or L 1933/43). In the Kielce region, *dziad* ‘old man’ and *baba* ‘old woman’ would lash out with straw whips at unmarried farmhands and girls on Ash Wednesday (K 18 Kiel 47) to make them more ardent in their pursuits. In Olsza near Kraków, wooden blocks would be tied to the waists of unmarried girls, who were then hit with a straw belt and sung to: *You didn’t want to marry, now you must walk with the block* (K 73 Krak 1/67).<sup>45</sup> A promiscuous woman was stigmatised by being taken around the church in a straw “crown” (Byst Kul 140) and when she was expelled from the village, she was made to wear a straw chaplet (Lud 1994/81).<sup>46</sup> The night before Christmas Eve farmhands would hit sleeping neighbours with straw whips, so that the latter would not suffer from eczemas, spots, or abscesses (ZWAK 1879/46).

In southern Poland, instead of the ritualistic straw bear, there was the carolling figure of *drab* ‘ruffian’ (Kot Las 122), who would wear a straw hat (Wiet SPog 166), as well as that of a carolling *dziad* ‘old man’, who would sport a straw-plaited whip (ZWAK 1890/63). Straw was also used to make *dziad*’s effigy, dressed in old men’s clothes – on the night of 25<sup>th</sup> Dec (St. Stephen’s Day Eve) or sometimes before Epiphany boys would place it in front of the houses of the girls they fancied (Kot San 86) or on the contrary, of those they did not fancy and wanted to ridicule (Kot San 86, 89, Kot Urok 123). The straw from the effigy was then scattered all over the field for a good crop (Kot Urok 123–124).

<sup>45</sup> *Nie chciałaś za mąż iść, musisz teraz przy klocu iść*. The practice was also known in Ukraine, where while “walking with the goat”, boys would hit girls with straw whips (Slav Tol 5/107–113).

<sup>46</sup> According to Zhayv Ukr 562, in Ukrainian ethnoculture straw symbolised extra-marital relationships: *Chey noch i o pivnoch soloma khorila, yak-em lubku tsiluvav, azh sya rozbolila* (“That night, at midnight, straw was burning, while he was kissing his sweetheart so much that she fell ill”); in front of the house of a promiscuous girl straw was scattered and sometimes the girl would wear a straw chaplet. Extra-marital affairs were called a straw fire. According to Slav Tol 5/107–113, straw was used to stigmatise young people unwilling to marry, e.g. in Slovenia a sack of straw was put by the door of a girl that would reject courtship; the Byelorussian *solomyannyi zhenikh* ‘straw groom’ meant ‘a confirmed bachelor’. Similar practices were also known in Germany, where at the end of harvest old maids were stigmatised by having their arms girded with straw and being driven into a barn, while confirmed bachelors were wrapped in a straw sheaf and taken away in wheelbarrows (in Saxony) (Wört Hoff 5/312).

(7) Straw symbols of winter, death, and evil are *Marzanna* (the Goddess of Death), *Śmiercicha* (Death), or *Judas* (Judas). In spring, straw effigies of *Marzanna* were made, also called *Morena* (Pod SGŚ 171) or *Marzaniok* in Silesia (Pośp Śląsk 157), *Śmierć* or *Śmiercicha* (Death) in Greater Poland (Kul Wiel 3/50), *Śmierzotka* in Podhale, *Śmierztecza* in Orava (Kąś SGO 2/442), and *zima* 'winter' in Kashubia (Sych SGKasz 6/213), which were then destroyed. In Silesia, a straw figure was drowned or burned on Laetare Sunday (K 43 Śl 18).<sup>47</sup>

The Catholic Church adapted the old Slavic custom of welcoming the spring, linked with the drowning of winter-death, and incorporated it into the cycle of Easter celebrations (Kul Wiel 3/317). The custom was also endowed with an additional moral dimension: instead of the Church-condemned *Marzanna*, people would drown or hang the figure of Judas as a symbol of unrighteousness and betrayal (Kul Wiel 3/51). On Holy Wednesday or Maundy Thursday, a straw effigy was thrown down from the church spire and drowned or dragged over the ground until it fell apart (Udz Krak 50–51, MAAE 1914/231, Lud 1906/311, Fran Kal 38, Or L 1936/70). On Easter Monday in Silesia, boys would walk around the village with a figure of *Judas*, impersonated by one of the boys wrapped in a straw sheaf and girded with a string (Or L 1929/160).

**12. Use in rituals and magic. Family customs.** Straw was used in practices concerning childbirth<sup>48</sup> and death,<sup>49</sup> according to the proverb *It is*

<sup>47</sup> Ritualistic straw effigies were made in other Slavic countries during New Year celebrations (cf. the Ukrainian *Matanka*) and spring festivals (Russian *Maslenitsa* and *Kostroma*, eastern and southern Slavic *Jaryło*, western Slavic *Marzanna*, *Marena*, or *Morena*). The effigies were usually burned or drowned in order to aid the vital forces of nature (Slav Tol 5/107–113). In Germany, during Shrovetide, the funeral of Bacchus was performed with a straw figure called *Bruder Alex* (Wört Hoff 2/1262). In Eastern Germany, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent a straw effigy was carried away and originally burned, later drowned (e.g. in Leipzig), which symbolised the destruction of death (Wört Hoff 5/918). In England, straw effigies were burned as symbols of something bad; however, an encounter with a man in a straw hat was considered to be a good omen – it was accompanied by singing *Strawberry Man, bring me good luck* and throwing a pebble over the left shoulder (De Vries Dic 445). An English proverb says: *A man of straw is worth a woman of gold*. In the poetry of Dylan Thomas, the straw man symbolises a mortal being (De Vries Dic 445).

<sup>48</sup> The association of straw with the birth of Jesus in the manger is a common pan-Slavic one (Slav Tol 5/107–113).

<sup>49</sup> Laying a dying person on straw to ease the agony is a pan-Slavic practice (Slav Tol 5/107–113); it was also performed in Germany. The straw was thought to have magic powers, it had to be thrown away and destroyed, usually burned (e.g. in Masuria) so that the deceased would not come back. This also prevented it from being eaten by the cattle, which would be damaging to its health (Wört Hoff 5/1096).

*on straw that one is born and on straw that one dies.*<sup>50</sup>

(a) A woman in labour was laid on straw to ease the delivery (Dwor WMaz 22–23, Udz Biec 132). If the delivery was especially painful, the woman was laid on long straw (Udz Biec 132), while the midwife would take three wisps of straw from different parts of the house's thatched roof, set them on fire and incense the puerpera (Lud 1896/335). Long straw stalks were added to the first bath of an infant girl so that she would have long hair (Wit Baj 67). The straw from a baby's cradle was thrown away into the pigsty so that he or she would not cry (Dwor WMaz 51).

(b) The pan-European custom of laying a dying person on straw was best preserved in south-eastern Poland (Kom PAE 5, map 15). The straw stalks placed under the person had to be long and straight, free from nodes, as those symbolise the body-and-soul tie-in and hamper their separation (Lud 1902/52). The best suited for this purpose was rye straw (Kom PAE 5/53). In Podhale, sometimes pea straw was placed under the moribund's head: *If he could not make it, they would give him pea straw and this would ease him.*<sup>51</sup> Sometimes a bundle of straw from the roof above the main window, the so called *kiczka*, was used for the purpose (Bieg Śmier 144, Udz Med 255). This was performed as a means of making the person "atone for their sins, because the straw pricks them like needles and their cries can be heard from one corner of the earth to the other" (PSL 1990/4/10). The coffin with the deceased was also placed on straw (Sych SGKasz 4/112); when a coffin was unavailable, the dead were buried wrapped in straw (PSL 1957/1/22). It was believed that the soul does penance on straw (Jaw Dąbr 82), which will last as long as the body lies at home (Jaw Dąbr 96).

The straw from the "dying" practices was not to be used for other purposes (Jaw Dąbr 96). It was not added to the manure (Sych SGKasz 5/83), so as not to induce bad crops (Wit Baj 195). It was not given to the cows, so that they would not lose their teeth and die (ŁSE 1960/162), nor was it strewn in cowsheds, for fear that the cattle would be afflicted by weakness (K 10 Poz 77). It was believed that such straw brings misfortune so it was usually burned, thrown away on the manure heap, under a fence, on the road (especially at a crossroads), or into a ditch at the roadside (and held down with a rock). In Greater Poland it was buried deep in the ground, beyond the farm or village. It was also left under a cross so that the deceased would not be coming back to the village. It was believed that if the straw was not destroyed, the cattle would not be healthy and the land would give bad crops for seven years: the deceased would have taken the crop away.

<sup>50</sup> *Na słomie człowiek się rodzi, na słomie umiera.*

<sup>51</sup> *Jak nie może skończyć, to dawali kiesi z grochu grochowanke, to go popuściło.*

On the Raba river, the straw from the bed of the deceased was kept until sowing time and strewn around the wheat field so that the birds would not destroy the crops. The cart that was used to carry the coffin was turned upside down to shake off the soul, in case it got tangled in straw, so that it would not stay near the house (Kot Urok 175).

(c) Straw in the wedding ceremony. Straw was associated with fertility, therefore it was spread for the bride and groom to walk on when they were heading for the ceremony;<sup>52</sup> the newly-weds were also given straw to lie on during their wedding night (Dwor WMaz 81). In the Lublin region, a straw bedding was prepared for them in the barn (Wisła 1892/853). Before leaving for church, the bride would throw straw out of her cart for the other girls (Wit Baj 165) – the one who caught the straw first was sure to marry right after the bride's wedding (K 27 Maz 233).

(d) Straw in love magic. To ensure that one's love is requited, a few straws from a bundle that was carried in one's shoes were burned and the ashes were added to the food or drink of the person whose affections were sought (Nad Kasz 57–58).

**13. Use in medicinal magic: a special role of straw from thatched roofs.** In folk medicine, rye, barley, or oat straw (or sometimes only the nodes from it) was used for bathing and drinking, as well as an incense. A special healing power was attributed to the straw from a thatched roof (PSL 1990/4/35; see 12 (a) above).

Incense from straw and moss from the roof of the house of a childless couple was used for faint-hearted people (Pal Zer 52).

For consumption, baths of brewed straw were made, for which the straw was taken clandestinely from the roof of the house that belonged to a widower and a widow who had remarried and lived as a couple. A child suffering from consumption was bathed three times in water to which were added: three straw stalks taken from the roof above the vestibule, three splints from a tree stem, and three old cabbage hearts, all of which were boiled while three prayers were said (Wit Baj 75).

Incense with straw from nine thatched roofs, dust from nine beds, and moss from nine wells were used for a person suffering from lumbago (Bieg Koleb 336).

Convulsions were treated by placing a straw sheaf under the person's head (it was called *głowacz* 'the one for head'), which was then buried in the ground to make the illness disappear (Bieg Lecz 33).

<sup>52</sup> During the carolling season, straw was strewn on the road between the houses of a dating couple (Belarus) (Slav Tol 5/107–113).

For a running nose, straw would be boiled for the person to dip their feet in the water (Pal Zer 161).

Abscesses and festers (called *świnioki* 'pigs') were covered with fine straw taken from under a hog (Pal Zer 161).

Warts were treated by rubbing them three times with a wisp of straw placed on a stick that had been used for cleaning a stove (Jastrz Lecz 154). Alternatively, on seeing two boys riding a horse, one had to throw a wisp of shoe straw at them and call out: *Hey you, doubles, take these warts away from me!* (Bieg Lecz 125).<sup>53</sup>

For a child to sleep peacefully, straw from the shoes that was dried on Christmas Eve was placed under the child's pillow (Pal Zer 160).

For one's hair to grow long, it was washed in water with rye straw (Udz Biec 361), for it to grow better, oat straw was used (Pal Zer 99).

**14. Use of straw in protective magic.** When a hare crossed the road, it augured misfortune. To turn it away, two stalks of straw or blades of grass were placed on the road in the shape of a cross (Wit Baj 283).

To protect one's home from misfortune throughout the coming year, straw was thrown on the roof of the house on Christmas Eve (PSL 1990/3/58–59).

To fix a broken kneading-trough, the farmer's wife would turn it upside down and burn bed or roof straw over it (Dwor Maz 227).

To protect oneself from throat and lung infection, straw wisps were made on St. Stephen's Day (Dec 26), put into shoes, and kept there until New Year's Day (MAAE 1914/223).

To prevent horses from dying, the straw from *Marzanna* was used to clean their feeding troughs (in Upper Silesia, Wisła 1904/532).

To protect oneself from fleas, a wisp of bed straw was burned on St. Stephen's Day (MAAE 1910/75); on Good Friday before dawn the straw from pallets was taken out of the village (1895/501).

Cattle was protected from a witch, if on Easter it was fed with straw from the roof (MAAE 1914/68). Witches were also deterred by hanging a straw sheaf on the barn door (Goł Lud 164, Wisła 1903/333) and, on St. Adalbert's Eve (April 22), by placing a handful of roof straw under the trough (Kot Urok 91).

So as to protect oneself from evil forces, straw or pastry crosses were placed in windows from Christmas Eve to the Epiphany or from the middle of Lent to its end (Drab Podl 67).

It was believed that meeting a priest brought misfortune, which could be averted by throwing a little straw or hay from the cart after him (K 51 Sa-Kr 59; cf. also K 17 Lub 83). When hunters met a cleric or a nun walking

<sup>53</sup> *Dwojaki, dwojaki! Weźcie ode mnie brodawki!*



or riding in the opposite direction, they would throw a straw stalk after them to avert misfortune (Lud 1901/282).<sup>54</sup>

### 15. Use of straw in practices to ensure prosperity and wealth.

In these practices, the best straw was the one collected on a newly ploughed field (Baz Tatr 149).

To ensure a good crop, crosses made of Christmas Eve straw were stuck in the field on New Year's Day (K 73 Krak 1/56).

For bread loaves to rise well, women would stick three straw stalks without ears or nodes in each loaf (Bieg Koleb 146).

For cattle to breed well, straw from three neighbouring farms was strewn for its comfort on Christmas Eve (Mal Krz 67) or the cattle was fed with the straw that had been used for girding the table from Christmas Even to the New Year (MAAE 1904/49; in Łodygowice).

When pigs or piglets were taken to the marketplace for sale, a handful of straw from their sty was thrown onto the wagon to ensure a good deal (Mal Krz 68). In Greater Poland, so as to ensure good husbandry, a handful of straw was added to the sack with the pig being sold in the marketplace (Kul Wiel 3/213). Sometimes the buyer would clandestinely try to steal some of the straw for his pigs to breed as well as those of the seller (Dwor Maz 202).

For the hens to lay many eggs, the Christmas Eve straw was strewn in the henhouse for their comfort on St. Stephen's Day (Dec 26) (Or L 1935/150), and the farmer's wife would feed them inside a circle made of the straw (Pęk Biłg 238). For all eggs to produce chicks, Christmas Eve straw was placed in the chickens' and geese's nests (MAAE 1914/228; Jarosław region, south-eastern Poland). For the chicks to breed well, in the village of Przebieczany in Little Poland the straw from behind the ceiling beam was strewn in the henhouse (MAAE 1900/124), while in Silesia the straw from the straw bear was used for the purpose (Pośp Śląsk 298).

To ensure a good hunt, the men would take a straw stalk from the bed, tuck it behind the belt and say: *So that I can escape misfortune as I go to the woods, I'll take a straw stalk and will be lucky* (Kot San 200).<sup>55</sup>

### 16. Use of straw in augury and fortune-telling concerning marriage, quality of the crop, life expectancy, and the arrival of guests.

This use is linked to straw as a medium in communicating with the great beyond (Kowalski 2007: 559).

On St. Andrew's Day (30 Nov) and on New Year's Day, girls would pluck straw from the roof and count the number of stalks: an even number augured

<sup>54</sup> In 19th-c. sources the practice is attributed to Jews.

<sup>55</sup> *Abym uszedł wszelkiej biedy, gdy do lasu sobie idę, wezmę sobie słomy ździebło, będzie mi się szczęście wiedło.*

marriage (Karw Dobrz 206, cf. ZWAK 1887/190) with a bachelor (Pośp Śląsk 15), an odd number – with a widower (Pośp Śląsk 15). In Kashubia, the straw from the Christmas Eve sheaf was used for the purpose (Lor Kasz 77), while in Jawornik (Little Poland) the seeds from ears of the straw on the Christmas table were used for a similar prophecy (MAAE 1904/74). If seeds were found, the girl would marry a farmer, if there were no seeds in the ears, she would marry a farmhand (Wisła 1892/646, Masuria). On St. Stephen's Day, girls would take the straw out of the house for the birds to perch on. If the bird was a sparrow, the girl would not marry; if it was a jackdaw, she would marry a widower; a magpie foreshadowed a nice lad (Gier Szczod 24).

In the Łódź region (central Poland), ears and seeds were sought in straw at Christmas. The cereal that produced the greatest number of seeds or ears would give the best crop the following year (ŁSE 1961/87). After the Christmas Eve supper, a handful of straw was thrown onto the ceiling beam. The number of stalks that stuck to the beam foreshadowed the number of stacks that would be harvested in the summer (Lud 1908/133, Cisz Sławsk 28; sim. ZWAK 1890/40, Udz Biec 155, Nieb Przes 223). On New Year's Eve, farmers would tell one's fortune from the straw taken from the Christmas sheaf (standing in the house): the length of the stalks and the look of the seeds would indicate the quality of the crop (Szyf MiW 34).

When the straw from the deceased person's bedding was burned, the direction of the smoke was blown indicated the next person who would die (Kul Wiel 3/186–187). On Christmas Eve, single stalks were pulled from a wisp of straw or from the Christmas sheaf: the one whose stalk was the longest was prophesied to live the longest (Kot Urok 121).

When straw was found lying on the floor (Stel Pom 240), or when two people said the same word or sentence simultaneously (Sim Wierz 287), it was believed that a guest would arrive. In Kashubia, straw lying on the floor meant the guest would be a woman (Sych SGKasz 5/35).

**17. Equivalences.** Straw functioned interchangeably with hay: either could be used as bedding; a sheaf of wheat or hay would be hung on the barn door so that the powers of the witch that spoiled dairy products were taken away (Goł Lud 164). This also functioned interchangeably with pea stalks: either was used to gird the Shrovetide bear (K 9 Poz 123, Krzyż Kuj 1/45, Drab Podl 21).<sup>56</sup> Straw or pea stalks were used to make an effigy of

<sup>56</sup> "The pea bear was a ritualistic figure common in Germany, the territory of today's Czech Republic, Poland, and Lithuania, usually in Shrovetide festivals but also on other occasions. Its name derives from the pea stalks that imitated the fur: they were wrapped around the person acting out the bear. This may have been done not so much for lack

death, which was then taken from one village to another and drowned or burned (K 7 Krak 176; cf. also K 43 Śl 18). A dying person was laid either on straw or pea stalks (Bieg Śmier 141). On her way to the church, the bride would throw straw or pea stalk behind her (Dwor WMaz 77).

**18. Symbolism of straw.** The symbolism of straw depends on the text genre. Generally, as is the case in standard Polish, straw – being light and combustible – symbolises things undurable or uncertain. This can be seen in the expressions quoted above: *stomiany ogień* 'straw fire' (enthusiasm that quickly dies away), *stomiany kawaler* 'straw bachelor' (one that has a child with another woman), *stomiany wdowiec* 'straw widower' (a male whose wife has gone away for some time), *stomiana wdowa* 'straw widow', etc. Similarly, something of little value was associated with straw: *one would not give a sheaf of empty straw for something* (NKPP dać 60), *stupid like a sheaf/bundle of straw* (NKPP głupi 62).

In Polish culture, straw is associated with poverty, thatched roofs, straw-insulated windows, etc. Threshing straw signifies fruitless work, cf. *threshing straw/hay is done in vain* (NKPP młócić 10), *to thresh (empty) chaff*.

In the folk dream book, straw augurs something bad: trouble, disease, death, a dead person, a quarrel, rumours, fire, visitors, a letter, a dance ball, or a woman. Long-stalk straw augurs illness and death (Nieb Pol 207–208).

In folk culture, straw has a developed symbolism associated with fertility (cf. point 11, 1–4) and eroticism (cf. point 7(b)).

In contemporary peasant poetry, the thatched roof is mythologised and ennobled as a symbol of the hearth, the familiar landscape, the little homeland that is remembered and that signifies the passage of time:

*Fare thee well, my hut and my thatched roof, the walls of my house whitened in the sun. Fare thee well, my home where we were raised, where our mother would rock us in the cradle.* (Maria Kozłowa; PSL 1990/3/18)<sup>57</sup>

*The children of the Zamość region, stand up – to your thatched-roof huts and paths lost in the golden wheat, to the green meadows, to the rustling woods.* (Władysław Sitkowski; Ad Złote 225)<sup>58</sup>

of a better substitute (since a sheepskin coat turned inside out would be just as good), but so as to be able to perform the 'bear burning' custom, sometimes at the end the carnival or on New Year's Eve. The pea stalks were indeed set on fire, then immediately extinguished with water. The bear, put on a leash or a chain by the 'bear man', would be walked from one house to another, to dance, and enable the owners to collect money. Instead of pea stalks, straw binders were often used." (Kiersnowski 1990: 391–392)

<sup>57</sup> *Żegnaj moja chato i dachu stomiany, pobielane w słońcu mojej chaty ściany. Żegnaj moja izbo, gdzieśmy się chowali, gdzie nas w kolebeczce matuś kotysali.*

<sup>58</sup> *Dzieci Zamojszczyzny, wstańcie – do waszych chat stomianych i ścieżyn zagubionych wśród złotych pszenic, do łąk zielonych, do tych borów szumiących.* ['The children of the

*You sparkle, my dear Lublin land, / Under the livid sky, / Like a gold jewel... / Your wooden-and-straw hamlets / Under the canopy of cherry trees and white birches / Have more beauty and dignity / Than / The gold altars of the cathedrals.* (Jan Pocek; Szcz Ant 631)<sup>59</sup>

*This rural hut with its roof of straw, / that bows its thatch today / reminds me of my younger years / for I was born in there.* (Cyryla Jedlińska; Niew Prow 90)<sup>60</sup>

*Translated by Adam Głaz*

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Zamość region” refers to the children (ca. 30,000) deported from the region during the Nazi *Aktion Zamość* of 1942–1943. transl. note]

<sup>59</sup> *Mienisz się, droga ziemio lubelska, / Pod niebem sinym, / Jak klejnot złoty... / Twe szare drewniano-słomiane wioski / Pod baldachimem wisien i brzoź białych / Mają więcej piękna i dostojności / Od / Katedralnych, złotych ołtarzy.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ta chata wiejska słomą kryta, / co dziś pochyla strzechę swą / ona mi młodość mą przypomina / ja w niej zrodziłam się.*

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